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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001431

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQ-SAUDI ARABIA: NO RAPPROCHEMENT IN SIGHT

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1280

[1](#)B. RIYADH 699

[1](#)C. RIYADH 730

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor John Fox for reason 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On May 29, Prime Minister Maliki publicly complained about Saudi Arabia's "negative stance" toward Iraq's efforts to improve the bilateral relationship. In his sharp response two days later, the Saudi Interior Minister suggested that Maliki himself was working against Iraq's interests with the Kingdom. This "media war," which has been extensively covered in the local media, reflects genuine frustration at Saudi Arabia's unwillingness to reciprocate what Maliki perceives to be GOI gestures toward the Saudis, as well as growing public anger toward Saudi Arabia among Iraqi Shi'a, who were outraged by anti-Shia comments recently made by a prominent Saudi cleric in Mecca. The upcoming national elections are likely to see an increase in Iraqi nationalist rhetoric, as candidates compete to burnish their patriotic credentials. There will likely also be a fierce battle for Shi'a votes between Maliki's Dawa party and its rival, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and no Shi'a politician will want to appear weak in defending Shi'a interests or Iraqi honor. End summary.

War of Words

[1](#)2. (U) Asked by Iraqi News on May 29 why no senior Saudi officials have visited Iraq and whether he intended to initiate relations with Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Maliki responded that "We have succeeded in opening up to most countries, but Saudi Arabia has negative stances. We have initiated (attempts) to create normal and positive relations, but these initiatives were understood in a negative way as weakness. We remain ready to accept a Saudi initiative because initiatives on our side have run out, and there is no use of repeating them unless Saudi Arabia expresses its desire for a relationship." The comments, widely portrayed in the media as an attack on Saudi Arabia, were posted on the official National Media Center's website.

[1](#)3. (U) Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz responded on May 31, telling "Al-Watan" newspaper that "The Kingdom wants only the good and stability for Iraq, in all aspects, but if there is someone in Iraq working against its interests and expecting the Kingdom to support him, this will not happen." He charged that Baghdad was not doing enough to control its borders and that Iraqis were infiltrating into Saudi Arabia. "The Iraqi government knows where the (foreign) fighters come from," he said. Nayef said that "The Kingdom would not allow any harm against Iraq's government and people."

[1](#)4. (U) Responding to Nayef's comments, close Maliki advisor and Dawa MP Sami al-Askari told al-Iraqiyya TV May 31 that "His statements are astonishing, especially since we know that half of, or more than half, of the foreign terrorists that entered Iraq and carried out acts of killing are Saudi

nationals. Meanwhile, Saudi security forces did not arrest any Iraqis involved in terrorism in the Kingdom." He noted that "We still hear fatwas (issued by Saudi scholars) that harm the political situation in Iraq, stir up terrorism, and sanction the killing of Iraqis...I do not say that the Saudi government is the party that sends them, but I say that the fatwas issued in Saudi Arabia are the reason that encouraged these Saudi young men to come to kill Iraqis and kill their children, women and elderly people." Askari reiterated Iraq's desire for good relations with Saudi Arabia, but regretted that "these efforts were not received positively by Qregretted that "these efforts were not received positively by the Saudi government." Iraq has done everything in its power to improve relations, he said, "The ball is now in the Saudi court. If they want to develop these relations, then they are more than welcome, but if they choose not to, then Iraq will not be the only loser.⁸

Possible Reasons

¶5. (C) Assistant Minister for Reconciliation Saad Mutalibi (Shi'a independent) told Poloff on May 30 that Maliki's comments were "restrained," considering that Riyadh had rebuffed several Iraqi efforts over the last two years to restore relations. For example, Maliki appointed a Sunni ambassador to Riyadh at the SAG's request, but he had difficulties presenting credentials and has had limited access to the Saudi leadership. (Note: The Saudis also have not sent an ambassador to Baghdad. End note.) The Prime Minister also sent two delegations to Riyadh to discuss security cooperation and overall relations, but neither was

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able to get high-level meetings. Saad claimed that Maliki's posture toward Riyadh is more than pandering to sectarian feeling; he is, rather, exerting nationalist muscle and "standing up" to an affront to Iraq's dignity.

¶6. (SBU) Maliki's May 29 comments may also be at least in part in response to a speech made by Saudi cleric Adil al-Galbani broadcast in the Arab media earlier this month claiming that in the "House of God in Mecca" Shi'a were infidels. Iraqi Shi'a leaders were outraged by the speech. Al-Galbani's remarks were the subject of debate in Iraq's parliament May 12, with MPs demanding an apology and saying: "in light of the fact that no cleric dare give a speech without the approval of the Saudi authorities, we consider this action as an attempt to regenerate sedition within Iraqi society by calling the majority of the people infidels." The speech came up again in Parliament on May 26, with a Shi'a MP stating that "hundreds of Shi'a are still demonstrating against al-Galbani's lies and it is important for the Parliament to express support for the people." PRT Najaf reported that there was a peaceful demonstration in Najaf against Al-Galbani's anti-Shi'a statements after Friday prayers on May 29.

Comment

¶7. (C) Maliki's recent comments reflect two things: genuine frustration at Saudi Arabia's unwillingness to reciprocate what Maliki perceives to be GOI gestures toward the Saudis, and growing public anger toward Saudi Arabia among Iraqi Shi'a. We predict that Iraqi nationalist rhetoric and sentiment will rise during the campaign period for the Iraqi parliamentary elections planned for January ¶2010. There will also likely be fierce battle for Shi'a votes between Maliki's Dawa party and its rival, ISCI. No Shi'a politician will want to appear weak in defending Shi'a interests or Iraqi honor. Maliki may also have learned a lesson from the criticism he received from fellow Shi'a after he called for reconciliation with Sunnis. At

that time, his rivals tried to portray him as pro-Ba'ath. If Maliki attempts to form a cross-sectarian national alliance for the elections, he will have to continually boost his Shia credentials by making statements like the one he made on Saudi Arabia.

18. (C) In current conditions, it will be difficult to achieve a major bilateral breakthrough before the parliamentary elections. In the meantime, we are exploring ways to encourage "track two"-type engagement that might foster a better bilateral climate. First, we will press Iraqi leaders to tone down the rhetoric. In addition, as proposed by both us and Embassy Riyadh (reftels), we will encourage reciprocal legislative exchange visits by Iraq's highly regarded new (Sunni) Speaker of Parliament and his Shura council counterpart (We were heartened to read -- ref c -- that such an exchange has been approved on the Saudi side). We could also encourage Saudi investment and development assistance to Iraq, perhaps through a GCC mechanism if the Saudis are hesitant to do this government-to-government. Finally, we note Embassy Riyadh's accurate description of problems resolving Iraqi debt (ref B), including the likelihood that Kuwait factors into this issue, and will work with our Riyadh counterparts to try to bring together Saudi and Iraqi working-level officials to discuss technical debt issues. Embassy Riyadh's report (ref C) noted Iraqi Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Ghanam al-Jumaili's surprise at Maliki's comments and that he planned to seek clarification of the Prime Minister's remarks from the Iraqi MFA. We will also follow up with the MFA. QMFA. We will also follow up with the MFA. HILL